

GARDENING/HORTICULTURE NEWSLETTER

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RECOGNIZE AND AVOID POISON IVY TO ENJOY GREAT OUTDOORS

As much as we like to think we control our environments, the simple fact is the outdoors holds a surprise or two for us, and not always a pleasant one. Poison ivy, a common weed found in most parts of the United States, causes an allergic reaction in about 85 percent of Americans and can cause incredible discomfort and ugly rashes when brushed against.

It's nothing to fool around with. Some people have encountered it and not had ill effects, but the fact is any of us can become allergic to poison ivy at anytime, so it is best to avoid it altogether.

The old saying, "Leaves of three, leave them be," is a good rule of thumb when identifying poison ivy. The weed has two forms, one which is a low plant and grows among other plants that are 6 to 30 inches high. This form, in essence, can "hide" in brush or overgrowth. The second form is a vine that can twine up trees, and the vine itself seems to have small tendrils or hairs. Both forms have three leaves, and anytime you encounter a plant or weed with three leaves, avoid all contact.

What causes a poison ivy rash is natural oil inside the plant called urushiol. When this oil gets on your skin – and you can get it from surfaces contaminated with it as well, such as clothes, garden tools, even pets – it begins an allergic reaction that develops into a red rash, usually within a day or two after coming in contact with it.

The rash will then form into blisters and become itchy. Depending on the location and the extent of the rash, it should begin to heal after a week. However, prevention is the best medicine.

The minute you think you may have come in contact with poison ivy, wash your skin with soap and cool water. Don't use hot water since that will open your pores and allow the urushiol to sink in, causing the rash.

If you get a rash, there are over-the-counter treatments you can try to relieve the itching and swelling. Hydrocortisone creams and calamine lotion can be applied to the rash itself to reduce and keep the area moist. Oatmeal baths and antihistamine tablets, such as Benadryl, will help overall discomfort.

It's important to keep a close eye on the rash because it can cause scarring. If you get a fever over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, or the rash covers large areas of your body, see a doctor immediately.

SURPRISE LILY

The Surprise Lily, Magic Lily or Naked Lady is a bulbous plant that belongs to the Amaryllis family and is native to southern Japan. The pink trumpets are produced atop the pale, naked 3-foot tall stems. The flowers are sterile and do not develop seed pods. The flowers occur in clusters of 5-7 and are about 4 inches long. The bulbs are 3 inches in diameter with long necks and persist for years once established. The foliage comes up in late winter and looks like a large-leafed clump of daffodils, but without flowers. There will be one bloom for about every 10 leaves produced by the clump. The leaves die with the arrival of the first warm days of late spring, usually disappearing below ground by late May. This growth pattern is an adaptation of the species to survive in an area with moist springs and prolonged periods of summer drought.

Magic lilies first appeared in the American garden trade in about 1880, but they have been cultivated in Japan for centuries. It was originally misidentified and sold under the name *Amaryllis halli*. The name *halli* refers to Dr. George R. Hall of Bristol, Rhode Island, who spent time in Japan after the Civil War collecting plants and seeing to the ophthalmological needs of the Japanese. He introduced many plants to the United States. The most noteworthy from an Arkansas' perspective being the Japanese honeysuckle, which has escaped cultivation and can be found throughout the state.

Magic lilies are easy to grow, doing well in any average soil in full sun or partial shade. They can be planted in spring or fall. If you are going to divide plants, dig the plants after the blooms fade. They require no fertilization and are bothered by no pests.

Probably the best way to use magic lilies in the landscape is mixed in a ground cover bed where their nakedness is not so apparent. The planting should include 10-12 bulbs scattered over at least 5 feet of bed area. When plants are in bloom, the length of the planting bed should be at least twice as long as the plants are high.

WATER HYACINTH (*Eichhornia crassipes*)

Live long enough and you begin to realize life is a balancing act. It's a balance between things we want and things we need; between things good for us and things likely to harm us; and between things we know and things we believe.

Sometimes we get to decide the appropriate balance for ourselves; sometimes Big Brother makes the decision for us. The recent ban on the sale and distribution of a popular water garden plant in Arkansas is an example of trying to strike an appropriate balance.

The plant in question is water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*), a floating perennial herb that has become a serious weed in the Gulf Coastal states since its introduction from Brazil at an 1884 exposition in New Orleans.

In infested areas, waterways become clogged each summer with water hyacinths that crowd out other species, interfere with sports fishing and ensnare thousands of boat propellers.

Though usually killed by frost, recent mild winters have allowed some populations to over winter in protected places in Arkansas waterways on the Arkansas and Ouachita rivers.

Water hyacinth is a fast growing plant capable of holding its rosette of glossy-green, waxy leaves up to two feet above the water. The leaves are trowel shaped with a conspicuously swollen petiole (stem of the leaf) that's spongy and aids in floating.

Each rosette forms a series of floating stolons (horizontal stems) that radiate in all directions and terminates in a new rosette of leaves. The plant quickly forms large floating mats that blow around with the wind. In ideal conditions such as Florida, the size of a colony can double in size in 6 to 10 days when the water temperature is around 85 degrees.

The common name is a reference to the flowering spike that shoots from the whorl of leaves during the summer months. Eight to 15 lavender to bluish flowers are produced on stems that reach a foot in height.

In May, the Arkansas State Plant Board added the water hyacinth to the prohibited plants list for the state. Four plants – purple loosestrife, giant salvinia (a floating fern), Japanese blood grass and water hyacinths – have now been deemed too potentially invasive to risk sale as ornamentals.

The ban prohibits in-state sales and importation of the plant from out-of-state nurseries.

Water hyacinth has been popular in sunny water gardens throughout the state for a number of years. Don't expect roving bands of plant inspectors to knock at your door and inspect your water garden for this now-banned plant. But, unless you can over winter it yourself, you won't be able to buy it in the future years.

It wasn't too long ago when water hyacinth was considered a good-guy in the fight to improve water quality. In the 1980s, researchers looked at using the fast growing water hyacinth in greenhouses located beside sewage treatment plants. The submerged roots were intended to filter out nitrates and phosphates in the sewage water and provide an environmentally friendly tertiary water treatment system. The plants that were produced were to be converted to pig feed.

How real is the threat imposed by water hyacinth in Arkansas waterways?

It's hard to say, but that is where the balancing act comes in play. Attempts at eliminating well established species from locations where they had become firmly

entrenched aren't promising. But attempts to keep invaders out that are not well adapted, as is the case here, usually prove more effective.

CLEAN UP TO REDUCE FAVORABLE SNAKE HABITAT AROUND YOUR HOME

Hot weather such as that we've been experiencing sends not only people but critters as well looking for shade. For snakes, a combination of shade and food is a dream come true. Where's the most likely place to find such a combination of habitat elements? Unfortunately, it's likely to be near your house or outbuildings!

You can't scare them off, repellants are unreliable at best and snake-fencing is complex and costly. So the best method to keep these pests away from your grounds may be to modify the habitat they're seeking during these hot days. That means removing shelter and food.

The primary food of most snakes, especially the larger ones, is birds, bird eggs, and rodents such as rats, mice, and chipmunks. No control program for rodent-eating snakes is ever complete without removing rodents and rodent habitats. Put all possible sources of rodent food in secure containers. Be sure to keep all dog or cat food cleaned up after each feeding, and make the stored food unavailable to the rodents. Keep all vegetation closely mowed around buildings. Where possible, remove bushes, shrubs, rocks, boards, and debris of any kind lying close to the ground, as these provide cover for both rodents and snakes.

CONEFLOWER (*Echinacea Orange Meadowbrite*)

All of our garden flowers originated as wildflowers. Most were developed by breeding and selection during the gardening explosion that occurred in Europe between 1820 and 1870.

Not surprisingly, in the current gold rush mania that gardening has become in the last decade, plant breeders have again gone back to the wild to look for new garden plants. In the last decade, breeders have reinvented one of these – the coneflower – to produce stunning new perennials with totally new colors.

Except one, all of the six or so recognized species of coneflowers (*Echinacea*) are found in the Ozarks. Most are prairie plants or glade dwellers in the open woodlands. The purple coneflower (*E. purpurea*) has long been grown in gardens with the other species mostly left alone in the wild, at least until recently.

Beginning in 1997, Dr. Jim Ault of the Chicago Botanic Garden, began hybridizing coneflowers. He crossed the familiar purple coneflower with *E. paradoxa*, the yellow coneflower found in limey soils of the southern Great Plains. The several hundred seedlings produced from this first-hand cross were uniformly purplish pink.

These initial hybrid seedlings – the F-1 hybrids in breeding parlance – were crossed amongst themselves and seed saved. This second generation (the F-2 generation) flowered for the first time in 2001. These seedlings segregated into a rainbow of colors

ranging from pink to yellow and all shades in between. Many showed a distinctive orange color. From this population, 50 distinctive new color forms were selected.

One of the best of these was Orange Meadowbrite, a 30- to 36-inch tall coneflower released in 2004. It's like the typical purple coneflower in growth habit except for the unusual shade of its three inch wide flowers.

Orange Meadowbrite flowers from late May through early summer, producing blooms that are a unique shade of orange. Some call the color tangerine, which is close but still not exactly right. The color changes shades under different lighting conditions and as the blooms age. Because it has undertones of other colors besides orange, it blends well with other perennials. Uncharacteristically, Orange Meadowbrite flowers have a distinctive spicy orange fragrance.

Ault has produced upwards of 20,000 coneflower seedlings during the last decade and continues to release new introductions. Mango Meadowbrite (a branch sport of Orange Meadowbrite) was introduced in 2005. Ault's 2006 release is Pixie Meadowbrite, an 18-inch tall, long flowering pink with *E. tennesseensis* parentage. He describes Pixie Meadowbrite as having "an incredibly long bloom time and small perky flowers."

Future releases from the Chicago program will include clones with plants having various shades of red, apricot and white. These new clones are mass produced in tissue culture and have become hot items amongst gardeners wanting the new plant introductions.

Other than requiring at least four hours of sunlight and good drainage, coneflowers are easy to grow. They do best in a rich soil and have good drought tolerance once established. Trimming off the blooms can encourage a later flush of flowers. But, because finches love to pick the seeds from the mature cones in the fall, many gardeners prefer not cutting the plants back after flowering.

For more information on any of the above topics, please feel free to contact me at the University Of Arkansas Division Of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service at 425-2335.

Sincerely,

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Staff Chair

MDK/sa